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MEDIA RELEASE

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USNS Stockham Responds to Distress Call in Solomon Islands

*(Courtesy of Chief Mass Communication Specialist Bill Gowdy,
Commander Seventh Fleet/USS Blue Ridge Public Affairs)*

USNS STOCKHAM, Solomon Islands – It was just after sunset when the distress call came from the Taiwanese fishing vessel Yun Fa Zoi. Yun Fa Zoi was in the Solomon Islands carrying Red Cross members around this small archipelago nation comprised of over 900 islands, to give medical aid to survivors of the April 2 earthquake and tsunami. It was carrying two injured Solomon Islanders to transfer them to the Hospital in the town of Gizo, one of the most devastated areas, when it drifted off course and ran aground in the shallow reef-filled waters off Gizo's coast.

The distress message was received by Merchant Marine Third Mate Kyle Franklin, Mate of the Watch on board USNS Gunnery Sergeant Fred W. Stockham (T-AK 3017). It came from the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), an Australian-led multinational force, present since 2003. It was determined that the waters off Gizo were too shallow to allow Stockham to get close enough to provide direct assistance. "We continued to monitor the situation in the event we could provide other assistance or a possible rescue at sea," said Franklin.

Yun Fa Zoi was advised by Gizo port to abandon ship. During this process, one of its crewmembers slipped and fell onto the reef that disabled their vessel and was unconscious.

At 2130 flight quarters were called on board Stockham and "Blackfoot 2," an HH-60 from the embarked Expeditionary Sea Combat Unit One (ESCU-1) from Helicopter Anti-Submarine Squadron Ten (HS-10), was in the air with Stockham's Doctor, Lieutenant Commander Tad Pratt and a fully prepared Search and Rescue (SAR) team. Blackfoot 2 arrived at Yun Fa Zoi a short time later.

Though the ship was grounded on a reef a few hundred yards from shore, the real challenge was getting the air crewmen and rescue team on board. Descending to the Yun Fa Zoi were Aviation Warfare Systems Operator Second Class (AW/NAC) Sean McGowan of Savannah, Georgia and Aviation Warfare Systems Operator Second Class (AW/NAC) Justin Cantley of Charleston, West Virginia. Both crewmen and the pilots, Lieutenant Gary Jenkins, of Cape Coral, Florida and Brian Jamison, of Honolulu, Hawaii, had just finished a busy day of flying other operations when the call came in. "I was in the Air Det Office finishing up the next day's flight schedule," said McGowan. For Cantley, a pre-taps workout in Stockham's gym was cut short.

The environmental conditions were the biggest threat to the mission. "...rain, wind and night flying in a poorly charted region of the world, over a ship on a reef, with ten to twelve foot seas (make it) a more demanding operation," said Jamison.

Once aboard Yun Fa Zoi, McGowan and Cantley quickly checked the victim's vitals and stabilized him. "He was unconscious with head trauma and possible broken bones." They secured him to a litter so Aviation Warfare Systems Operator Second Class (AW/NAC) T.J. Trotto of San Diego, the hoist operator on board Blackfoot 2, could bring the victim onto the helo to be further assessed by Pratt.

"The Aircrew guys did a great job under the conditions we were in," declared Pratt, adding, "He would've died if he stayed on the ship over night." Blackfoot 2 headed for the hospital in the town of Mundi. Pratt stayed with the 23 year-old Indonesian seaman in Mundi until he regained consciousness. "He definitely had a concussion, and possibly other injuries. I stayed with him until he was able to answer questions like, 'What is your name?'"

Meanwhile back on Yun Fa Zoi, McGowan and Cantley secured the two injured Solomon Islanders who were being transported to Gizo and got them onto Blackfoot 2, ferrying them to a soccer field across from Gizo Hospital. Operations continued for three hours, in the end transporting a total of fifteen Yun Fa Zoi crewmembers and Red Cross workers in addition to the three injured persons.

HS-10's Expeditionary Sea Combat Team is proud of their accomplishments on this rescue. "The 'real deal' -- it was awesome and rewarding to get to do what we train for," said Trotto. McGowan added, "It was unfortunate this happened, but it feels good to do what we train for, knowing our training works and to save these people." Lieutenant Jamison summed it up saying, "It was fortuitous U.S. assets were in the area, otherwise they would've been stuck until the next morning."

USNS Stockham is in the Solomon Islands to facilitate the U.S. Department of State and non-governmental organizations in their assessment of potential humanitarian assistance operations. On April 1, an 8.1 magnitude earthquake and resulting tsunami struck the Solomon Islands, causing casualties and significant damage. USNS Stockham is one of 16 Maritime Pre-Positioning Ships and is part of Military Sealift Command's Pre-positioning Program and has a mixed crew of U.S. Navy personnel and Merchant Marine seaman.

For more news from around the Seventh Fleet visit www.C7F.navy.mil.

Photographs of the rescue operation can be obtained by contacting Public Affairs at the US Embassy, Canberra.

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